

Bourne
toWrite...
creative writing
workshops

The Thames Barge

by Sue Hitchcock

They started early, took the dogs for their planned reconnaissance of the decrepit barge, Roma's beloved home, full of childhood memories and what she had hoped would be her main material asset.

Gran's caravan had occupied the two girls for most of the week, while they were waiting for the chance to visit the Adele. Margie had already thrown out the disgusting dirty lace curtains and the knickers and vests, which were too horrible to take to the nursing home. Her old slippers were hardly recognisable, Bobby having whined over them and later slobbered and chewed them, missing the old lady. In an old shoe box they found a pair of white satin stilettos with pointed toes. Margie's feet were too big, so she knelt and played Prince Charming to Cinderella Roma who shimmied around until she twisted her ankle. How on earth did Granny wear them for her wedding?

The things which seemed to hold memories – photos, horse brasses the wedding shoes and a veil with a coronet they found later, were packed carefully and along with the carved stool Gran used to place by the door to enjoy the sun to watch her busy fairground family, were taken to the warehouse. The painted signs and unusual machinery intrigued Roma and when Declan joined them, she asked,

“I see what you mean about having stuff to help repair the Adele.”

“I'm sure I can figure something out. I need to look at the problem and think it out.”

Margie loved being with Roma in their own little home, and couldn't wait for her friend to wake, crawling into the narrow bunk with her at first light. Roma had been working until midnight. She had slept from one a.m. until nine before she was extracted from her captivity by her friends and adjusting was slow.

Once in a while she would picture the creek with the barge and she would catch her breath, but Saturday Declan promised they would go and plan what they should do. Roma didn't lie in that morning. She put on her dad's wellies and her oldest jeans, ready to go. When Margie woke, she was talking to Ruby on the caravan steps. It was time to go back to Conyer Creek.

Roma let out a deep, unhappy sigh and Declan made a growly hmm, but Margie saw only the hopes for a future, which she expected would be fun. The barge, Adele, lay grumpy and uncomfortable in the mud where the last spring tide had dumped her. She couldn't move so the sunny side was far too hot and the northern side, the seaward side was cold, especially her bilge keel on that side, which was like a whale's fluke, cold and stiff from lack of movement. She longed to lie in the soft waves in the estuary and spread her sails, to visit the other shore, deftly guiding herself with both bilge keels keeping her on course. If she could speak she would plead with Roma, who was her heart, to mend her cracking skin, fill those growing gaps between the planks and oil her machinery.

Roma stretched out her arms and laid her head on the wood, but her arms spread only a tenth of the length of the side and could hardly be called a hug, but Adele knew she was there.

Declan had taken out a notebook and was making notes:

1. Clear mud from nearside
2. Make basic repairs to the hull
3. Attach ropes or chains from the other bank

Then he stopped, "Roma? When is the next high tide?"

"What state was the moon in last night?"

Margie had been playing with the dogs, but being a keen moon watcher, she knew the answer, "It was the waning quarter, so no moon in a few days."

"That means the tide will be quite high, but not especially. It would be better on the full moon, but the highest is in September, at the equinox." Added Roma.

"We've got a lot of work to do before we can get her afloat. This will require more manpower. I'll see if any of my fairground mates are available."

"What can we do today?"

"Well, I did bring some shovels. We could make a start on digging her out on this side."

So work began.